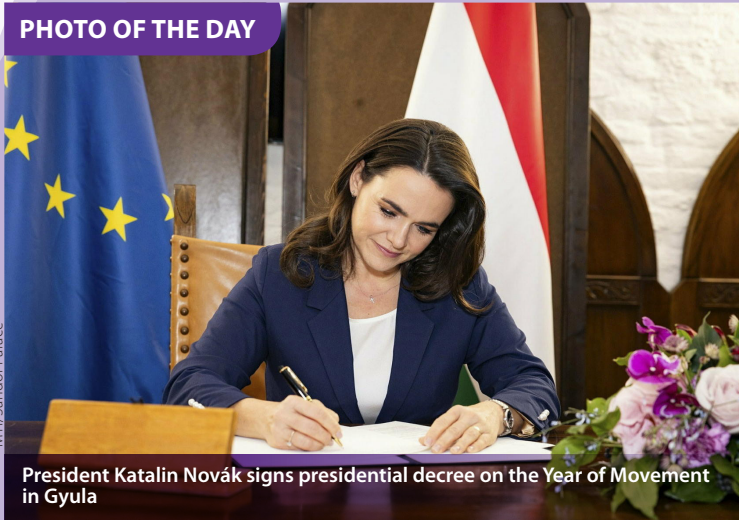


PHOTO OF THE DAY



President Katalin Novák signs presidential decree on the Year of Movement in Gyula

UPCOMING EVENTS

EU justice ministers meet in Brussels

CoE Parliamentary Assembly meeting in Strasbourg

Events related to the wars in Ukraine, Israel

TOP STORY

SWEDISH PM PROPOSES BRUSSELS MEETING

Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson has accepted Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's invitation to meet to discuss Sweden's NATO accession.

Kristersson said he would be glad to meet Orbán to discuss Sweden's NATO accession and other bilateral matters in Budapest at some point, though the discussion, he added, may also take place in Brussels next week. In a letter, Kristersson said he agreed with Orbán that "more intensive dialogue" between their two countries would be beneficial.

Türkiye's parliament ratified Sweden's NATO accession on Tuesday. Hungary's national assembly has yet to vote on the matter. Orbán invited Kristersson to Budapest on Tuesday to discuss his country's NATO accession and other bilateral issues. Meanwhile, Hungary's government made it clear from the start that it supports NATO's enlargement, regardless of the opinions of the ruling party MPs, but at the same time, "we are nobody's pawns," Speaker of Parliament László Kövér said in an interview with news portal Index on Sweden's NATO accession. He added that Sweden "has gone to a point of defaming Hungary and its democratically elected government and restricting its room for manoeuvre, which cannot be dismissed."

ORBÁN: HUNGARY SUPPORTS MOLDOVA'S EU INTEGRATION

Hungary supports Moldova's European Union membership unconditionally, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said after talks with Moldovan Prime Minister Dorin Recean in Budapest on Thursday. Besides the advantages of membership for Moldova, "the EU would also benefit from new energy, from countries known to be inhabited by balanced, stable and hard-working people," Orbán told a joint press conference with Recean. Moldova signed the association agreement with the EU eight years ago, which Orbán called a "painfully long time". He added that he hoped they could "recover some of the lost time by speeding up the accession talks". Hungary would also benefit from a tariff exemption between Moldova and the EU, Orbán said. Hungary is also working to re-establish direct flights between the two countries. The prime minister said relations were untrammelled by any unresolved disputes, and each had a positive view of the other and sought cooperation. At the same time, the intensity and strength of diplomatic relations were not what they could be, he added, so the purpose of today's meeting was to forge closer cooperation.

Orbán said Moldova was "on a straight path" to European Union membership and Hungary understood the geopolitical environment that

made its EU accession a matter of urgency. The prime minister offered to host a large number of students from Moldova at its diplomatic academy.

The two countries have been in diplomatic relations for 32 years and signed a strategic partnership agreement four years ago, Orbán noted, adding that bilateral trade was worth 200 million dollars. "Our pharmaceutical exports are growing rapidly, our food exports are solid and we also have a presence in the banking sector and in aviation," Orbán said. As both countries are energy importers, Orbán said, it was in the interest of both Hungary and Moldova that energy networks in central and south-eastern Europe should be as developed as possible, also in the areas of economic and military security, he said.

Speaking after a meeting with Moldovan Deputy Minister Vladimir Bolea, Péter Szijjártó, the foreign minister, said Hungary's stance was clear: every potential candidate must be assessed individually and Hungary was a firm and unconditional supporter of Moldova's EU membership which would "benefit the bloc and increase its competitiveness".

"We must not link the integration process of various countries to each other and we must not allow worse-performing countries to take others integration hostage," Szijjártó said. "Speeding up Moldova's EU membership would help the EU to improve its competitiveness again."

Hungary has always promoted the enlargement of the EU to the south-

east, he said. "We are, as always, at the disposal of the Moldovan government, and will do everything in our power to speed up the integration process," Szijjártó said.

Low-cost airline Wizz Air is slated to restart its flight between Budapest and Chişinău, another step towards boosting bilateral economic cooperation, he added. Noting the strategic agreement the two countries concluded four years ago, Szijjártó welcomed that bilateral trade had reached and maintained a record 200 million euros. Hungarian exports of food products and pharmaceuticals have a prominent role in that growth, he said. Hungarian companies have exported grain worth more than 2 billion forints (EUR 5.2m) to Moldova, he said. Hungary also supports the extension of the tariff exemption agreement as a tool to further boost economic ties, he said. "We support that talks on maintaining long-term tariff exemptions should start as soon as possible," he added.

The trust of Hungarian companies towards Moldova is also supported by OTP Bank's prominent role on the Moldovan financial market, he said. "The governments of Hungary and Moldova share a sense of special responsibility for protecting the national agriculture, and represent the interests of the Hungarian and Moldovan farmers respectively," he said. Maintaining the ban on the imports of Ukrainian grain would protect the interests of farmers and the domestic markets, he said.

NOVÁK MEETS MOLDOVAN PM IN SE HUNGARY

President Katalin Novák met Dorin Recean, the prime minister of Moldova, in south-eastern Hungary on Thursday. The meeting took place in the historic castle of Gyula, where Novák set up her office during a three-day visit to Békés County. She told Recean she liked to visit rural areas regularly "to get to know the people living there, the beauty of the area and the local difficulties". The meeting with Recean is the first with a foreign dignitary to take place during one of her visits, she added. Gyula is also a sister city of the Moldovan city of Balti, she added. The Sándor Palace said Novák had discussed bilateral economic and political ties and their stance on "current crisis regions" such as Ukraine.

NOVÁK DECLARES 2024 'YEAR OF MOVEMENT'

President Katalin Novák declared 2024 the "Year of Movement" in a declaration signed on Thursday. In the declaration signed in Gyula, in south-east Hungary, Novák asked public servants and the civil society to aid people in ensuring access to sports and to "help put personal decisions to live a healthy, active life into reality", Sándor Palace said in a statement. Novák pledged to support all initiatives to that end, the statement said. "Committed to promoting sports, daily activity and a healthy and active

lifestyle, and to promoting the active rest of Hungarian families -- and in view of the fact of UEFA Euro 2024 football championships and the Summer Olympics -- I declare 2024 the year of movement," the declaration said.

GEERT WILDERS TO ATTEND CPAC HUNGARY

Geert Wilders, the leader of the Netherlands' Freedom Party, will attend this year's CPAC Hungary in Budapest in April, daily Magyar Nemzet said. The paper said Wilders, who aims to become the next Dutch prime minister after his Freedom Party's election win in November, announced on X that he would participate at the conference. "Thank you for the invitation to speak at CPAC Hungary in April to Miklós Szánthó and the Centre for Fundamental Rights. Proud to be there and speak!" Geert Wilders said in the post. Hungary will host the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) on April 25-26 with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán as keynote speaker.

GOVT SPOX: MORE THAN 1.5 M FILL OUT NATL CONSULTATION SURVEY

The government has processed the results of the latest National Consultation public survey and found that the more than 1.5 million respondents "overwhelmingly supported" Hungary's national sovereignty, the government

spokeswoman said. More than 98% of respondents favoured a ceasefire and peace in Ukraine over weapons deliveries, Alexandra Szentkirályi said in a video on Facebook. Respondents also opposed the establishment of "migrant ghettos" in Hungary, and said child protection regulations should be tightened. They also expressed support for Hungarian farmers and the agriculture sector's GMO-free status, she said, adding that respondents also wanted stronger measures taken against foreign influence.

More than 98% of respondents said the caps on household utility bills should be kept in place and that the freeze on interest rates should be extended to this year, Szentkirályi said. Close to 98% supported maintaining taxes on excessive corporate profits. Just under 98% of Hungarians opposed Brussels's support for Palestinian organisations in light of the threat of terrorism, she added. Also, 99% of respondents said Hungary should not spend any more money on supporting Ukraine until it has received the EU funds it is entitled to, the government spokeswoman said.

AGMIN: NAGY DISCUSSES PRESERVING TRADITIONAL RURAL VALUES WITH ITALIAN ORGANISATION HEAD

Minister of Agriculture István Nagy has discussed Italy's ban of artificial meat at a meeting with Ettore Prandini, head of the Italian agricultural organisation

Coldiretti. Hungary, he said, was also considering banning lab-grown meat.

The matter of regulations in this area will be on the agenda of Hungary's upcoming EU presidency, with extensive dialogue planned in the subject, Nagy said in a ministry statement on Thursday. They also highlighted the desirability of preserving traditional rural values. Nagy said unprecedented resources were available to support Hungarian investments in the food industry. "Our country relies on Italian investors and their technological know-how when it comes to implementation," he said. The difficulties caused by Ukrainian agricultural products were also discussed at the meeting. "It is our duty to protect Hungarian farmers' interests," Nagy said. It is an important principle for Hungary that food products imported from third countries to the European Union should meet EU quality requirements, he said.

KÖVÉR: HUNGARY GOVT BACKS NATO ENLARGEMENT, BUT 'WE ARE NOBODY'S PAWNS'

Hungary's government made it clear from the start that it supports NATO's enlargement, regardless of the opinions of the ruling party MPs, but at the same time, "we are nobody's pawns," Speaker of Parliament László Kövér said in an interview with news portal Index on Thursday on Sweden's NATO accession.

Asked if he found the situation awkward, as it seems Hungary will be the last to ratify Sweden's NATO accession, Kövér said: "Why should this be awkward for us? If the Swedes don't find it so, I don't feel bad for a moment. On the other hand, someone has to be last." Asked whether this was a failure for Hungarian diplomacy, Kövér said Hungary had made its problems concerning Sweden's bid "quite clear" before.

"Hungary takes seriously that NATO -- in contrast with the one-time Warsaw Pact -- is a defence alliance of equal and sovereign states, and it is in our interest to be a member of this alliance," the speaker said. "To make it clear to everyone: member states here make a voluntary commitment whereby, if any other ally is attacked, it will automatically be considered an attack directed against them and they will provide military assistance to the attacked party. Does everyone understand how great a responsibility this is? We will collectively enter a military conflict if someone is attacked."

"But now the Swedes -- and let me note that the Finns as well -- have gone to a point in defaming Hungary and its democratically elected government and restricting its room for manoeuvre, which cannot be dismissed," he said. After Hungary's parliament ratified Finland's accession to NATO, Finland immediately joined a European Court procedure against Hungary, the speaker added.

Kövé said the situation was handled by Hungarian diplomacy in "the most correct manner", arguing that it had supported the enlargement, submitted the relevant motions to parliament and showed openness to help deal with the situation that caused uncertainty among some of the MPs. However, in a democracy, the final word is not given by the government, but by parliament, he added. "Despite the fact that the entire process of NATO enlargement is lacking in the seriousness of thought and democratic thoroughness appropriate to the weight of the matter, the parliamentary majority behind the government supports it in principle," Kövé said. "I initiated a parliamentary delegation to visit both countries, to make them see that there is a small problem. The response given at the time was not satisfactory, to put it mildly. And now it seems the Swedes do not even appreciate the final gesture."

Asked what the Swedes should do, Kövé said it would be a good idea "to take each other seriously". "Or do you think we should beg them to clarify the problems? If I may use a slang term, we are nobody's pawns. I think there is a serious misunderstanding in the Swedes' minds," he said.

As for cooperation with Türkiye, Kövé said he had made it clear in several interviews that Hungary had no agreement with Türkiye on who should ratify the enlargement and when, adding: "we can decide on our own when such a step should be taken."

"We are not influenced by how Türkiye otherwise manages its own problems," he said. "Let me note, though, that Swedish diplomacy made big efforts very quickly in order to settle its disputes with Türkiye. Sweden's prime minister also visited Türkiye. I regret that the Swedish politicians did not even try to take advantage of the time created by the delay in the Turkish ratification to talk to us as well."

Kövér said the government did not expect Sweden to "do penance", but that they should not give the impression of ignoring Hungary. "I don't believe this would be too great a demand. For us, Hungarian interests come first -- perhaps this is only natural," he added.

Asked whether parliament would convene for a special session to discuss Sweden's accession, Kövér said he had no doubt that one of the opposition parties "which typically do not serve Hungarian interests" would initiate such a session, "probably in vain". "Anyway, I don't feel that anything is pressing us, in fact, I don't think there is an extraordinary situation," he added. Asked whether it was possible to know which Fidesz MPs did not support Sweden's NATO accession, Kövér said: "You are talking to one of them now. But let me clarify: I would also be happy if our hopeful allies gave me the chance as soon as possible to change my position in good conscience". On the motivation behind his position, Kövér said "we have simply had enough of our country being treated

as a cheap game for bored politicians who couldn't think of anything better to do or want to draw attention away from something, and wipe their muddy shoes in Hungary. Let me be clear: this whole circus would have been over a long time ago if Mr. Stoltenberg had put half as much effort into convincing Swedish politicians as he put into sending us messages," Kövér said.

BUDAPEST MAYOR'S OFFICE: CITY TO GET HUF 300 BN IN EU FUNDING

Budapest is set to receive 300 billion forints (EUR 775.8m) in European Union development funding over the coming years, the Mayor's Office said. The city will get 178 billion forints for transport developments, 50 billion for public space developments, 34 billion for equality developments and 38 billion forints for flood protection and water management, the office said in a statement. Some of the developments to be funded from the monies are already under way, they added. The funds will be allocated towards the Home in Budapest Strategy aimed at turning the capital into "a green, open city of opportunities", the office said. They said key steps could be taken over the coming years to prepare for and mitigate the effects of climate change. The funds will also be used to "ease the housing crisis" and implement significant social developments. They said the condition for receiving the funds had been that Hungary would

have access to them, adding that they were "a recognition of the preparatory work carried out by the city council".

The statement cited Budapest Mayor Gergely Karácsony as saying in Brussels that the reason why the funding had been approved was that the city's urban development goals coincided with those of the European Union. "We are building a sustainable, green city that exercises solidarity," Karacsony said, announcing the development package.

FIDESZ MEP: EP THREATENING LEGAL ACTION AGAINST EC FOR UNFREEZING FUNDS FOR HUNGARY

The European Parliament is threatening to sue the European Commission over its decision to unfreeze a portion of EU funds owed to Hungary, Andor Deli, an MEP of Hungary's ruling Fidesz told a joint hearing of the EP's budgets and budgetary control committees in Brussels. Addressing the hearing on the implementation of the rule-of-law conditionality regulation in connection with Hungary, Deli said the Hungarian government was under attack for ideological reasons. "Summer is coming," he said, referring to this year's European Parliament elections. "By looking at the dissatisfaction" of European citizens, "it seems that this House may become a different place after the elections," he said.

European Commissioner for Justice Didier Reynders said the EC

had decided last December that the judicial reforms adopted by Hungary met the conditions put in place by the Commission. These reforms, he said, included changes to how the head and deputy head of the Kúria, Hungary's supreme court, are appointed, as well as changes to the regulation of the administration of courts. Reynders added, however, that the EC still had concerns regarding the child protection law and the asylum law, and "the related parts of the programmes remain blocked".

Nicolas Schmit, the commissioner for jobs and social rights, said that after thorough assessment and exchanges with the Hungarian authorities, the Commission had considered the four milestones relating to the independence of the judiciary to be fulfilled. "As a result, certain parts of the CPR funds were indeed unblocked," he said. "This means that until 2030, the

Commission may reimburse up to 10.2 billion [euros] to Hungary from the cohesion policy funds, maritime and fishery funds and home affairs funds."

Johannes Hahn, the budget commissioner, said that if Hungary implemented the changes, an agreement could be reached. He said the purpose of the conditionality regulation was "not to punish member states ... but to ensure the sound protection of the financial interests of the Union".

TOURISM AGENCY: 2023 RECORD YEAR FOR HUNGARY TOURISM SECTOR

The performance of Hungary's tourism sector last year beat that in 2022 and matched or exceeded the record year of 2019, Zoltán Guller, the head of the Hungarian Tourism Agency (MTÜ), said, citing preliminary data. He told

a press conference that some 16 million tourists spent 41 million guest nights in Hungary last year. Revenue of tourism accommodations and catering establishments rose in the double digits, beating the rate of inflation, he said.

Commercial lodgings registered 1.3 million more guest nights last year than in 2022, he said, adding this was a significant increase because estimates showed that international conflicts reduced the number of guest nights by one million. Total revenue of tourism accommodations was 860 billion forints (EUR 2.2bn), up 23% compared with 2022, he said, adding that guests spent 1,780 billion forints at catering establishments, 18% more than the year before. Of the roughly 16 million tourists, 7.1 million were foreign, an 18 percent increase from 2022, he said. Guller said the sector was expected to see sustained growth this year.